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Summary

Reconsidering the Uniform

Existential and religious identity reconstruction among Swedes after military service

Military cultures shape the narrative identities of service members which may resonate deeply within the individuals' selves. This implies that the transition from military to civilian life begins in an existing narrative definition of a person, from which the journey to new civilian presuppositions calls for a narrative re-definition or reconstruction of the story of who I am, a process which may be experienced as a challenge, perhaps even as a threat, by the self. A shift from military service to a civilian life equates to a transitional journey from one culture to another, from one identity to another, wherein the different cultural content likely shapes rather different narrative identities of the self. Relatively little research has been conducted on narrative identity reconstruction among voluntarily released service members, and a significant missing aspect is to sustain through a longer period of time this exploration of identity processes; there was a paucity of such temporally long investigations. Moreover, existential, spiritual or religious dimensions in the longitudinal identity reconstruction among service members in transition are rarely discussed in preceding research. Taken all together, these observations were the impetus for the design of an empirical, longitudinal and contextual research project on self-identity work. The focus and approach of the project were included within the body of practical theology which equated that the interpretation of the analysis was formulated in conversation with theological traditions and related areas of existential, spiritual, and religious research.

The overarching purpose of this study was to describe the role of existential and/or religious dimensions in identity reconstruction among Swedish military personnel during the process of becoming civilians. The formulated purpose called for a contextual, qualitative, empirical, and longitudinal focus with a narrative approach to lived life experiences among service members in transition. The research project adopted an annual interview design to cover the transitional processes among the participants, and the interviews were conducted from 2013 to 2016. The sample was derived by a snowball sampling method and consisted of nineteen Swedish service members in transition to a civilian life. They had numerous variations due to age, rank, branches, mission experiences and total years of service. The majority of the sample included service members aged between twenty-three to thirty-five years old. Four service

members were around sixty years old, and thus their transition was actually the process of retirement. There were no confessional requirements to participate in the study. The participants were initially organized into three groups, roughly equal in size, depending upon the amount of time which had elapsed between the exit and the first interview.

The central research question derived from the purpose of the project was: What is the role of existential and religious dimensions in identity reconstruction among Swedish military personnel in the process of becoming civilians?

The following subquestions outlined the analysis of the project:

- What are the experiences of Swedish military personnel in the process of becoming civilians?
- How is the identity constructed and reconstructed in the transition from a service member's to a civilian's narrative?
- What are the existential and/or religious elements in this process?

The analysis was conducted by utilizing a narrative approach within a Dialogical Self Theory framework, a pairing which demonstrated to be particularly useful in the enterprise of understanding experiences and identity processes in lived life. A transition implied a disruption of a story that created voids in a personal narrative into which new characters may progressively emerge and grow. Meanwhile preexisting characters continue to act. One of the basic premises of Dialogical Self Theory was that different I-positions produced different narratives. The narrative analysis was tailored to be an inductive inquiry, and the research design was built around the interview. This was approached as a qualitative inquiry process which addressed self-identity work in transitional movement wherein stories were compared across time. This meant that the longitudinal focus must be significant in order to describe the narrative identity reconstruction as an ongoing process. Such an analysis included content as well as process analysis of narrative accounts. The combination of a narrative and longitudinal approach was vital to capture the content and the evolution of each individual's identity reconstruction process throughout the transition from military to civilian life. The longitudinal approach, together with existential and religious dimensions in self-identity work, rendered this project a novel contribution to the field of research that addresses transition from military to civilian life.

The first subquestion on transitional experiences was considered as an inductive and individual content analysis which thereafter was developed into five overarching organizing themes as a result of the analysis. Within the five common themes, a number of transitional experiences were titled as issues or subthemes so as to organize the experiences within the overarching themes. The hermeneutical principle for the development of these themes was that the issues or subthemes could be understood in reference to the overarching theme and vice versa.

The five overarching transitional themes which organized the experiences were:

- Identity issues
- A pro-militaristic position in the self
- Emotional issues
- Satisfaction
- The importance of significant others

It unfolded throughout the study that the transitional experiences led the participants onto three narrative evolutionary paths: a full transition from military to civilian life (which eliminates a relationship with the Armed Forces), a hybrid outcome of a civilian/military path (which alongside the civilian life at some point sustains a more formal or informal relationship with the Armed Forces), or a full return to military service (which at some point aborts the civilian transition). In fact, thirteen participants eventually entered onto a military tailored path and followed that path as long as the study continued, while six followed a full transition from military to civilian life. The timeline in the sample suggests that the crucial time to select a path, in regards to transitional experiences, spanned between roughly two months to two years post exit. Participants who traversed upon the same path often varied strongly in terms of post exit time. Thereby it became more meaningful to organize the sample based upon the evolutionary paths of transition.

The second subquestion of how identity was constructed and reconstructed referred to how preexisting and new I-positions shaped the identity claims in the interview narratives during transition, and how these narrative claims changed their stories of who I am across time. It was assumed during the analysis that storied characters of the self (e.g., military, student, employee, and other civilian identities) held corresponding I-positions in the self, which was driven to reorganization amid transition. The results of the analysis were presented as representative processual cases belonging to one of the three paths: a full transition from

military to civilian life, a hybrid outcome, or a full return to military service. The three paths gave a specific type of storied evolution among the participants, and below are three tables which summarize the content of the self-identity work within the three paths as expressed throughout the interviews and finalized during the third and final interview cycle (Time 3) by the participants.

A full transition from military to civilian life

Overarching themes	The content of identity reconstruction (Time 3)
Identities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A reversed asymmetry between military/veteran identities and new civilian identities wherein the new civilian identities become more influential; a salient tendency is that new civilian characters tend to be constructed with counter features in relation to the military characters • A clear sense of a military “me” persists, but without particular adjustment problems • A richly developed reconstruction of a new meaningful story of who I am as a civilian wherein several civilian I-positions/characters appear to cooperate in pursuit of shared desires • A withdrawal from military community and camaraderie in favor of a salient relational positioning to civilian friends and life
A pro-militaristic position	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pride of having served and positive emotions attach to it
Emotional issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wholly ameliorated or at least not demonstrated
Satisfaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embracement of a new way of life and identities
Significant others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preexisting and new civilian promoters are significant for the processes of reconstructing identities and lives

A hybrid outcome

Overarching themes	The content of identity maintenance and reconstruction (Time 3)
Identities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-existence of military/veteran identities and new civilian identities, where military/veteran identities may maintain an influential position in the self, and where the perception from time to time may be filtered through a military/veteran lens; the new civilian characters tend to be tailored with different features than the military ones but not be as salient as in a linear path to civilian life; from time to time tension may exist between military and civilian I-positions • A clear sense of a military “me” but without particular adjustment problems • A growing reconstruction of a new meaningful story of who I am as a civilian wherein several civilian I-positions appear to cooperate in shared desires • A decline in regards to military community and camaraderie in favor for relational positioning to civilian friends and life
A pro-militaristic position	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pride of having served and positive emotions attach to it • Reenlistment to part-time service
Emotional issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grew less painful, even wholly ameliorated or at least were not demonstrated
Satisfaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embracing both military and civilian life to varying degrees
Significant others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civilian promoter positions assist the transition to a civilian life while military others and battle buddies have significance for the maintenance of service and military identities

A full return to military service

Overarching themes	The content of military identity renewal (Time 3)
Identities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A distinct asymmetry between military/veteran identities and new civilian identities, where military/veteran identities maintain a dominant position in the self, and where the perception is filtered through a military/veteran lens • A clear sense of a military “me”, and in some cases relatively minor adjustment problems in civilian life • Distinct difficulties to find meaning and/or motivation in a new civilian life, which implies difficulties of reconstructing the story of who I am within a civilian realm • Reunion with the extraordinary community and camaraderie • Dichotomy between military and civilian worlds/relationships
A pro-militaristic position	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pride of having served and positive emotions attach to it • Reenlistment to full-time service
Emotional issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grew less painful, even wholly ameliorated or in the least undemonstrated
Satisfaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embracement of the return to a military way of life and identity
Significant others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Military others and battle buddies have been significant for the return, while the lack of civilian promoter positions hindered the transition to a civilian life

It was also suggested in the interpretation of this analysis that the embodied ideology of military service among many of the participants included subordination to a higher purpose, which demonstrated to equate potential sacrifices and a commitment to a community of battle buddies who shared and lived by such standards. The values, beliefs, commitment to local community and battle buddies were considered as implicit religious. It was also proposed that for some participants this served as a type of lived and implicit religion which provided them with a higher purpose of life, sacrifices, meaning, and satisfaction, and participants described this meaning as difficult to find demonstrated in other contexts.

The exploration of the third a final subquestion on existential and religious elements or themes in the process opted for an inductive approach to articulated questions of life in the self-identity work. Existential elements referred to storied experiences with relevance for the questions of life in the transitional process. The method was to ask explicit life questions which explored the lived life of the participants in the present process of transition, but also reflections upon personal stories within the interview narratives which had major (past) or may have significant (future) impact on the participant’s life. *Existential elements* was used as an open code with the potential to address and inductively organize such storied experiences in the self-identity work. The result of the analysis included six common existential elements or themes across the sample with relevance for the self-identity processes, as presented below:

- Identities
- Meaningful employment and/or life styles
- Significant others

- Beliefs and values
- Sacrifices imposed upon significant others and/or the self
- Temporary departure from society to instead envelope one's self in the natural world

The concept of religious elements or themes was chosen within this dissertation to refer to narrated experiences of relevance for the participants' questions of life which were connected to some type of belief in or experience of God and angels, i.e. transcendent or higher powers, and/or spiritual emotions such as uplift, awe, humility, mystery, gratitude, joy, peace, and serenity. The method was to ask questions in regards to the beliefs and experiences, but also considered personal stories within the interview narratives which have had or may have religious/spiritual influence on a participant's life. *Religious elements* was used as an open code with the potential to address and inductively organize storied experiences with relevance for the questions of life which narrated explicit religious elements. Again, there were no confessional requirements to participate in the study, yet with time five participants described themselves, under their own ambitions, as believing in God or angels or having experienced a religious/spiritual dimension in the Swedish nature or in church during musical events.

In addition to the empirical inquiry of the process an evaluation letter was given to each participant when the third interview was concluded. This was not part of the original research project proposal but was considered as an interesting addition to the design since several participants had articulated positive effects throughout the interviewing. It was concluded from these evaluation letters that the interview cycles in general assisted the participants to reflect upon their self-identity process, and that this reflection has subsequently provided some of them with an increased self-understanding and awareness about military identities and other identities in regards to the temporal and spatial (within self) dimensions in transition to civilian lives or return to (different forms of) military service.

In the final part of this dissertation, a theological theory on transition from military to civilian life is constructed using the empirical results of the analysis in the previous chapters as a foundation. This theological theory is existentially and spiritually oriented and integrated with a narrative and dialogical framework. This theory provides the research field on transition from military to civilian life with an alternate voice which presents a tentative and contextual, existential and spiritual theological proposal of such a journey, a journey of transition that can benefit from correlational and critical dimensions located in time and space. This theological

theory on transition from military to civilian life suggests that the calling to friendship decreases the impact of a potential shared and collectivistic military spiritual depth, invites new potential sources of spiritual depths linked to old and/or new identities, dissolves feelings of estrangement, and supports the cooperative spirit within the self, which taken altogether may advance the self-identity work during a transition. The calling to friendship implies dialogue and openness to the other, someone or something which was previously perceived as more unlike the self, as well as a collaborative and curious approach towards the self.

The conclusion of this dissertation suggests that three types of narrative evolutionary and centering models for the self-identity work during transition have been displayed in regards to this Swedish context and sample. For the majority of the participants in this study, the self-identity work in transition implied existential reflections upon questions of life such as who am I, who will I become, where is my place in the world, and where am I going. It is also suggested that beliefs and values were one distinct divergence point in regards to the selection of civilian or military tailored paths, and thus the storied evolution of the selves, in response to these existential issues. From an existential perspective it could be suggested that a transitional evolution, no matter where it may lead a participant, has entered a more stable phase when the evolution of stories and characters has been shaped in dialogue with meaningful answers to the existential questions of life such as who I am, where am I going, and where is my place in the world. From a theological outlook it is suggested that a firmer footing is given to such a phase if it rests upon the existence of spiritual depth(s) of life, which is/are linked to identities of the self and brought into dialogue by the self. This theological point of view suggests that spiritual depth(s) appear(s) to provide stability in the self-identity work, a proposal which also works in the service of a military spiritual depth and military identities.

The theological theory presented in this dissertation, in combination with the unexpected extensiveness of the impact of the interviews, and even the participants' anticipations of and reflections over the interviews, upon the participants' self-identity work have relevance for the arena of spiritual care and reflection in order to help build spiritual fitness among service members as a preparation for a forthcoming transition. In resonance with voices and perspectives which emphasize the spiritual components in service members' self-identity work, this dissertation proposes a method for further elaboration within a Swedish context: building spiritual fitness through narrative self-reflection.